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canaries in electric rain

darren jorgensen: decibel, small things



Small Things, Decibel
photo Brad Serls

THERE IS A LOVELY AWKWARDNESS TO A DECIBEL PERFORMANCE, AS ITS MEMBERS YOKE TOGETHER ELECTRONIC AND INSTRUMENTAL SOUNDS TO TRY OUT COMPOSITIONS THAT TRANSCOPE THE TWO.

Decibel arrive on stage with all of the formalities of a chamber orchestra, wearing funeral suits and gazing seriously at scores unrolling on an array of networked laptops. Into this quiet, conservative atmosphere they work with the quirky edges of new music, each piece holding a surprise within it that turns the conservatism of composition on its head.

In Agostino Di Scipio's Texture/Residue the musicians play without playing, tapping their fingers on the instruments without blowing or drawing a bow. Here lies the awkward moment that Decibel are working with, as we expect to hear the harmonies of instruments working together but are instead confronted by a tapping of fingers on cello, flute, saxophone and the like.

At some point being amused by the piece turns into a fascinating experiment in listening to what you usually deign not to hear. Instrumental sound is also the sound of the materiality of the instrument, a materiality that is here attacked vigorously by the fingers of the players, building to an anxious and beautiful texture of sound.

Liminum, by the outfit's artistic director Cat Hope, is a brilliantly didactic example of what Decibel is interested in doing—colliding electronic and instrumental sounds, as if in a centrifuge. Here instruments imitate a distorted electronic sound, as if taken from a horror film soundtrack. There is a dark ambience at work here, as the instruments are required to remain at the pace and tone of the sound, never rising or falling to the registers they are capable of. This is Decibel at their most interesting, as electronic and instrumental sounds flesh themselves out in relation to each other, here beginning to sound positively industrial as a violin twists through the amplification of pedals.

Such experiments are symptomatic of the kind of awkward and fascinating fit that Decibel create, in compositions that sometimes generate harmony but often highlight the ways that sounds can slide and grate against each other. In Liminum, it is as if some bulbous creature is trying to order a drink in a bar but cannot make itself understood. Amid such experiments the standout instrument of the concert became

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the piano—ably played by Stuart James—pulling many of these sounds together just as they were moving in different directions. The piano also tied much of the concert to sounds that resembled those from a 1980s horror movie. A new work by Australian wunderkind Anthony Pateras, commissioned by Decibel, also had a haunting feeling to it, as did an atmospheric, moody composition by Perth's Joe Stawarz.

The highlight of these horror themed pieces was JG Thirwell's Canaries in the Mineshaft/Edison Medicine from his Manorexia project. Thirwell is better known for the brashness of Foetus, but like many rock musicians, discovered that he was also good at composing music. Innovatively combining the sound of a skipping CD, a record player and baby accordion, Thirwell's composition offered a chance for the ensemble to show off what they are really good at, as different angles of musicality were thrown together in a series of distortions that built to sublime cacophony.

To throw the whole concert into a different register, a final, happier piece by Bohren and der Club of Gore called up images from a moody 1970s conspiracy film. Old cars in traffic and a recording of rain combined in one of those mixed up combinations that kept the concert attuned to the Decibel concept, while pushing its continuity.

Such disruptions make for a lively Decibel concert as short pieces try out different ideas, throwing sounds together and pulling them apart again. This gives their performances a freshness that can transform into a nervous disposition, as an audience waits for an irruption of new sounds. In a traditional concert setting, where everything is prim and proper, this could well be fatal to an experience of the music. Such discomfort provides however the perfect atmosphere to experience the uncertainty that comes out of collisions between one type of sound and another.

Decibel, Small Things: Decibel performers Cat Hope, Stuart James, Tristen Parr, Malcolm Riddoch, Lindsay Vickery, Aaron Wyatt, Callum Moncrieff, Perth Concert Hall, May 28

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COOL PERTH NIGHTS

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LYNDON BLUE

DECIBEL: SMALL THINGS @ STUDIO UNDERGROUND, STATE THEATRE CENTRE, MONDAY MAY 28

May 30



The thing about experimental music – well, not THE thing but definitely a thing – is that it's got unique motivations as music goes. Free from specific aesthetic goals and often guided more by intellect than intuition, it's about exploring and advancing the possibilities of sound and what we understand 'music' to be. Which is a great proposition, but it carries with it the danger of becoming a bombastic pissing contest: sounds vying to be the most radical, at the expense of artistic rigour and internal logic. Perth's black-suited bastions of New Music adventuring, Decibel, are not so impetuous. Their experimentalism is a slow-burn process, working through constellations of ideas with a fine-tooth comb so as to not neglect the finer points – god, after all, is in the details. This is a group that understands the importance of the intricacies, the Small Things – so much so they named their latest concert after them.

Decibel also understand the importance of presentation, and tonight's show takes place in the superb State Theatre Centre, rising up from the base of the horseshoe bridge. A well-groomed usher ushers me down a staircase, a mass of gold cylinders dangling overhead as if the ceiling were a day-care centre for baby pipe organs. I pass the bar and its rows of impeccable glass and porcelain, its packet sugar and good-postured staff, and pass into the Studio Underground space.

There is the dinging of the concert-starting bell, the dimming of the lights, and it begins. No introductory banter, no briefing. Four members of the Decibel crew (namely Aaron Wyatt, Tristan Parr, Lindsay Vickery and Stuart James) take their positions behind strings, woodwind and piano – Malcolm Riddoch, meanwhile, seating himself at a laptop and an unseen trove of devices. A projector screen lights up overhead, and four small spheres appear on it, demarcating quadrants in the space. The four musicians with instruments begin to intone single, unembellished notes, sustained without variation until more small spheres begin to appear, orbiting the initial four. The spheres of increasingly varied colours are joined by arching lines, forming a quartet of revolving graphic scores that resemble four separate solar systems. As they move, the musicians interpret the visuals by some enigmatic process that I can't claim to decipher – but the ensuing sound is remarkable, and surprisingly 'beautiful' (by traditional standards) given what one

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might expect from a sound art or New Music performance. It's a swirling and glimmering (though unsentimental) array of frequencies, sunlit tones coalescing into randomly shifting harmonic clusters. To give you a less obscure idea of how it sounds, this piece – DAVID KIM-BOYLE's 'Point Studies #1' – wouldn't seem out of place on a Sigur Ros album. Still, it's far more than sheer beauty, with its intriguing processes and sideways references to ancient cosmic 'music of the spheres' notions fueling the brain, only soothing the ears and eyes on its way in.

Melbourne's ANTHONY PATERAS supplies the next composition, entitled simply 'Trio' and performed, as you might expect, by 3 members (James, Parr and Riddoch). It's a more jarring and less immersive listen, with fragmented piano and cello flourishes sitting awkwardly alongside digital gurgles triggered from the computer. Despite its aesthetic disjuncture, there is a sense in which the parts inform each other, moving together in moments of clarity before exploding apart again – as Pateras describes in his brief program notes, an "attempt at order during prolonged, honey-like, disorder."

Group director Cat Hope enters stage left, and what follows is the world premiere of 'Cells' by local composer Joe Stawarz, whose last name I don't know how to pronounce, but I'd like to think it's 'Star Wars' and so no-one's gonna stop me saying it that way. Like David Kim-Boyle's piece, the highly visual score for 'Cells' lies at its conceptual core, with an array of geometric designs and curves forming stimuli for performance. Unlike the Kim-Boyle piece, 'Cells' fails to leave a lasting aural impression, and seems to err more heavily on the cognitive side of things. Looking back, I can't for the life of me remember anything specific about how the music actually sounds here. Perhaps that's a lapse on my part, or perhaps it really is a less memorable listen. Next is 'Texture/Residue' by Italian renaissance man AGOSTINO DI SCIPIO, a piece that gives the oft-ignored incidental sounds of music performance their moment in the limelight. Eschewing 'played' notes (breath and bows are disallowed), Di Scipio presents all players with the same score and bids them finger their keys or strings rapidly without producing pitched tones. The resulting piece elevates sonic detritus to the status of music, sitting at the fore of our consciousness instead of falling victim to our everyday perceptual filters. This is hardly a revolutionary concept in experimental music, however: more interesting is the way that Riddoch then resamples and amplifies the mottled tapping sounds, playing them back at irregular intervals. We experience the audio out of step with the continuing hand-motions of the players, producing an uncanny rupturing of the assumed sight-sound synchronicity in music performance. It's a simple piece, but a rich one.

The first half of 'Small Things' rounds out with a composition by JG THIRLWELL, perhaps better known as '80s industrial one-mand-band Foetus, and meanwhile adopting such monikers as Steroid Maximus, Baby Zinane, Clint Ruin and many more. Tonight's piece – 'Canaries in the Mineshaft/Edison Medecine' comes from his Manorexia project, an outlet for freeform cinematic and textural ideas. Mind you, 'freeform' probably presents a misleading impression of the piece at hand – in fact, it is the most clearly structured and "musical" of all the evening's works so far. Featuring Callum Moncrieff on guest vibraphone, the soundscape eddies and billows melodically around driving rhythmic motifs, all the while preserving an eerie suspenseful quality. At the last minute Stuart James offers four swift hand waves and the group bursts at once into a fast-paced final section, propelled along by an insistent beat and tightly-wound melodic stabs.

A short interval happens: I have time to buy a weak coffee and extract some icy water from the stylish yet understocked cooler before it's back for more Decibel. Luring us into the show's second half is a new composition by local musician, poet,

artist and writer Amber Fresh (who I seem to have mentioned a lot in these reviews lately, and who indeed has her own column in this very mailout!) The piece, called 'Torndirrup,' draws inspiration from her physical and spiritual homeland, Torndirrup National Park in Goode Beach, WA, and begins with almost total quietude – like a day in a national park might. Like a true city slicker, my mind and sensibilities sit in wait for an overt musical development – a motif, a recurring noise, a compositional shape or structure – but instead what evolves is a supremely subtle collage of whispering string-drones and breathy waves of barely discernable notes. Over this mist comes Amber's recorded voice, coolly reciting the names of birds one might encounter in Torndirrup. The vocal sound bytes are flung from speaker to speaker along the length of the stage, as if each bird were positioned in a different tree, and soon I begin to feel as if the tremulous drones are blowing a salty wind across my skin, and the sunlight is streaking dappled brightness across the moist earth, and the birds are calling to each other through the pale green canopy with melancholy echoing trills. It's certainly a mood piece, and an evocative soundscape, much more than it's a stern-faced conceptual statement. And while that sets it apart from much of the work Decibel tend to favour, it also invests it with a remarkable amount of heart, which is often missing from experimental music. Though there's no 'lyrics,' the composition presents a moving landscape, and eloquently conveys Fresh's deep and ineffable love for the titular site.

Cat Hope's 'Liminium' comes next and provides a fitting foil for the poignant softness of 'Torndirrup.' Pitting viola against bass clarinet with laptop and effects pedals as mediators, it is boisterous and uncompromising, though not without complexity. Distortion pedals and octave-dropping pitch shifters usually associated with rock guitar find striking new applications here, transforming otherwise benign sounds into arresting industrial outbursts or thunderous cacophonies. But what we hear is not mere chaos: a mobile score leads the parts to interact and intersect at times, at others randomly warping the piece's structure to add an aleatoric volatility.

Lindsay Vickery's 'EVP' is perhaps the most intriguing piece of the whole night, if not sonically (it's a strong contender) then at least in its back-story. EVP stands for "Electronic Voice Phenomenon," that is, the capturing of ghost/paranormal voices on electronic media. The scientific basis of such a phenomenon's existence is uncertain, but whatever the truth might be, thousands of people search through reels of tape every year extracting the supposed speech of supernatural beings. Here, Vickery constructs a score based on such recordings, presenting approximations of their pitch, duration and velocity for the performers to reproduce. Ultimately, the instrumental sounds and the (rather terrifying) electronic vocalisations mesh into one, leading me to initially think that the instruments were triggering vocal samples as they played. This is Vickery's third recent work to engage with supernatural content, which appeals to me entirely, and I hope he continues to probe such mysteries.

If any naysayers are sat in the audience tonight, looking down their nose at these so-called musicians tapping and booming and droning away, their old-hat accusations would now be swiftly toppled by the performance of Decibel's final piece for the evening, a rendition of 'Prowler' by German jazz/ambient/doom ensemble Bohren & der Club of Gore. Hope takes to the double bass, Moncreiff returns to eke a smoky beat from a drum kit... Riddoch adds field recordings of rain on an Australian tin roof while Parr and Wyatt drone icily. James kneads the piano with aplomb, and Vickery wails with a thrilling sense of espionage on the sax. On the one hand, it's hard to see why this piece – an ultimately accessible and straightforward bit of creepy jazz jamming – makes its way into the night's repertoire; the inclusion of electronic samples seems more tokenistic than crucial.

On the other hand, I find it hard to care, as it sounds utterly awesome and helps debunk the immature suggestion that an experimental act should never breach the realms of convention and tonality.

Tonight would barely have sated the desires of those looking for a wholly eccentric, confrontational night of noise and subversion. There were, of course, moments of bold abrasiveness and plenty of strange sound, but really the consistent theme was subtlety and focus. Providing a zoomed-in look at specific concepts, meditations and commonly neglected sounds, Decibel probed not only the conventions of Western Art Music, but indeed, of experimental tendencies themselves – to reveal how the smallest things can sometimes be the most telling, touching and compelling.



All The Small Things

By [Jack Midalia](#) on [May 20, 2012](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Tags: [Decibel](#), [Small Things](#), [Tura New Music](#)

Small Things is a multi-genre exploration of the minutiae of music from a series of local and international composers happening on May 28. The event is in part an examination of the ways in which the development of new scoring techniques has allowed incredible detail to musical works previously unimaginable.

The work of Decibel New Music Ensemble and Tura New Music, Small Things will feature everything from the “high art of Melbourne composer Anthony Pateras to the jazz drone of German trio Bohren and Der Club of Gore, the indie pop musings of Amber Fresh next to the eerie arrangements of JG Thirlwell’s Manorexia, the electronic compiling of Italian composer Agostino Di Scipio versus David Kim-Boyle’s spiraling scores, as well as new works by emergent Perth composer Joe Stawarz and Decibel members Cat Hope and Lindsay Vickery”. In short, exactly the sort of weird and wonderful stuff that tickle our earbones in just the right way.

Small things takes place on Monday, May 28 at Studio Underground State Theatre Centre, Northbridge. Pre-sales are available from [Bocs](#).

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